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ABSTRACT

The past 15 years have brought a re-evaluation of women's adult development in light feminist thinking. However, many outdated assumptions in psychological theory remain comfortably ensconced; to challenge these ideas, some misrepresentations of women's experience are examined. The focus is on Erik Erikson's explanation of the second stage of adulthood: Generativity vs. Stagnation. Although feminist writers have been relatively kind regarding Erikson's views, his notion of a singular psychosocial crisis in middle adulthood may be more relevant for men than for women. Some alternative views of middle adulthood are examined, such as Carl Jung's ideas regarding adulthood. Ways in which to blend the masculine and the feminine are explored and some of the tasks of middle adulthood are described, followed by a challenge to Erikson's view that women in middle adulthood primarily "care" for others. It is suggested that such stage theories may not adequately explain women's adult development and that the masculine identity path does not properly describe women's experiences. Also, in women's lives, generativity occurs earlier than previously hypothesized, runs concurrently with other psychosocial tasks, and diminishes during middle adulthood. Contains 38 references. (RJM)

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RUNNING HEAD: Revisiting Generativity

Revisiting Erikson's Views on Women's Generativity or Erikson Didn't Understand Midlife Women

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Revisiting Erikson's Views on Women's Generativity
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Erikson Didn't Understand Midlife Women

Abstract

This article contends that Erik Erikson's second stage of adulthood, Generativity vs. Stagnation, misrepresents the experience of middle adulthood for women. Erikson maintained that the psychosocial task of that period was Generativity, the care of future generations. However, research contradicts Erikson's view and weaknesses of the work are noted. In this paper, research studies are reviewed and findings indicate that personality expands in midlife; women describe a move away from care of others with a return to one's self. The relevance of a single task, linear model is questioned and alternative explanations of middle adulthood are proposed. It is suggested that, in women's lives, generativity occurs earlier than previously hypothesized, runs concurrently with other psychosocial tasks, and diminishes during middle adulthood.

Monday, August 18, 1997
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Revisiting Erikson's Views on Women's Generativity
Or
Erikson Didn't Understand Women, Either.

The last fifteen years have brought a reevaluation of women's adult development in light of feminist thinking. Old methods of conducting research with boys or men and generalizing the results to girls and women are no longer common. Yet, in the body of unquestioned psychological theory, too many outdated assumptions remain comfortably ensconced.

This paper revisits and reinterprets a particular misrepresentation of women's experience, Erik Erikson's explanation of the second stage of adulthood, Generativity vs. Stagnation.

Erikson's View

Erikson's views have received kinder treatment from feminist writers than other psychoanalytic theorists because he introduced a psychosocial view to stage development that softened the strong biological outlook. His stages of identity development are well known and have permeated popular culture as well as college classrooms. Erikson (1959) posits three stages in adulthood, Intimacy vs. Self-Absorption, Generativity vs. Stagnation, and Integrity vs. Despair. Generativity vs. Stagnation occupies middle adulthood and is regarded as a time of "...establishing and guiding the next generation

(p. 97). The task of this stage is "care". The positive outcome is generativity and the negative outcome is stagnation or self-absorption.

During his long career, Erikson did not substantially change his thinking from a 1954 paper in which he called generativity an "unpretty term" that is "intended to convey a more basic and more biological meaning than such terms as creativity or productivity do". Generativity includes "works, plans, and ideas generated either in direct connection with the tasks of securing the life of the next generation or in wider anticipation of generations to come" (p. 274). In a 1967 interview, Erikson only slightly expanded the task of Generativity to say that "one begins to take one's place in society, and help in the development and perfection of whatever it produces" (Evans, pp. 50-51). Around the same time, in his book Gandhi's Truth, Erikson (1969) wrote that in generativity, "a man and a woman must have defined for themselves what and whom they have come to care for, what they care to do well, and how they plan to take care of what they have started and created" (p. 395). Ten years later, he placed generativity in a context greater than one lifetime and referred to it as the biological link between generations (Erikson, 1979). In 1986, Erikson described Rejectivity as a "malignant" tendency at one end of the Generativity/Stagnation continuum, and Overextension as the "maladaptive" tendency at the other extreme. Overextension refered to "care to individuals and concerns beyond one's capacity to include" (pp. 44-45). Unfortunately, with regard to overextension in the care of others, "maladaptive" describes much of women's lives.

As more has been learned about women's adult development, Erikson's assumptions require additional thought. Three significant weaknesses become apparent to review and amend.

The notion of a singular psychosocial crisis and task may be more relevant for men than for women. Identity formation in men and women do not necessarily follow identical paths.

In spite of his attention to culture in other writings, Erikson curiously fails to consider the extent to which sexual differences may be culturally conditioned.

Generativity fails to address the midlife shift, and fails to appreciate that women have already devoted years to nurturing others and may be moving into a natural self-focused period.

Alternative Views of Middle Adulthood

Writers have called for a general reworking of Erikson's developmental chart (Gilligan, 1982) and specifically his portrayal of the progression through identity to intimacy (Douvan & Adelson, 1966) which reflects a masculine bias that emphasizes separateness of growth rather than growth in connection. Aware that there are dangers of overemphasizing sex differences as well as underemphasizing differences (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1990), Erikson's ideas about middle adulthood still fly in the face of copious material that describes other dynamics.

Certain features of the middle years have been described regularly by others, beginning with Jung (1931) who saw this period as a time of turning inward, "introversion". He compared the human lifetime to the sun rising, spreading light and warmth ever wider until noon. Then began the decline which was the counterpart to rising, "the reverse of all ideals and values that were cherished in the morning" (p.12). In this metaphor, the middle years are after noon. Jung used this same notion to describe the components of masculinity and femininity. He likened these attributes to a psyche

storehouse, where unequal supplies of substance were used in the first half, leaving the remainder for the second half. Therefore, women reach into more of their supply of masculine qualities in the second half of life. The older person, having "lavished light upon the world" must illuminate herself. Jung noted that individuals are unprepared for this change and experience confusion, but "whoever carries over into the afternoon the law of the morning... must pay for it with damage to his soul"(p.18). The repressed aspects of self offer an attainment of personal completeness. Guttman's research (1967) supported Jung's theory, including cross culturally. Sociologist Bernice Neugarten described the years between 40-50 as high energy, followed by a process of "interiority", a movement of energy away from the outer-world to the inner-world (Neugarten, 1968). "Interiority" is the increased preoccupation with self and one's own needs rather than those of others. If the shift is from outward to inward, reclaiming misplaced qualities, certain characteristics that have been investigated can be examined.

Blending The Masculine And Feminine

Studies in adult development look at one variable or another, trying to figure out what influences personalities in middle adulthood, but find neither one factor nor another. The changes cannot be attributed to menopause, the empty nest, or involvement in caring for parents, so it is not simply biology or one's roles that enable positive shifts. All these factors exert influence. Personality evolves from responses to demands of different periods of life, but also continues to change as a result of long-term trends, not single life events. Accumulated studies find that, in middle adulthood:

- Women increasingly use their skills to cope with life's problems (Nelson, 1994)

- Engagement with the world leads to a new sense of self (Viederman, 1988). In their forties, women become increasingly the people they wanted to become (Lebe, 1982).
- Women become less defensive, and show greater self-esteem and confidence (Bruch & Morse, 1972; Helson & Moane, 1987; Roose & Pardes, 1989).
- Women evidence greater commitments to work (Barnett & Baruch, 1978; Wink, 1991), not replacing, but equal to active mothering (Helson & Moane, 1987).
- Women show more assertiveness (Chiriboga, 1975; Guttman, 1987) and independence of judgment (Bruch & Morse, 1972; Wink, 1991;York & John, 1992), qualities that have been traditionally viewed as "masculine". Women are better able to reach into the so-called masculine, or instrumental, attributes and integrate new qualities with established expressive abilities.
- Women have access to more of themselves; they do not lose psychological characteristics but ADD to their existing personalities (Bruch & Morse, 1972; Morse, 1978) and their attitudes can change (Chiriboga, 1981; Kelley, 1955; Mitchell & Helson, 1990).
- Some women appreciate their changing roles. They have the opportunity to express dimensions of personality that had been previously suppressed as not congruent with their lives. Livson (1976) found that life expanded at fifty, for non-traditional women who lived traditional lives
- Women feel authentic and describe their lives as "first rate"(Mitchell & Helson, 1990) and report feeling "like my own person" (Helson & Moane, 1987).
- Women are able to bring both feeling and rationality into decision-making and develop more control over their lives (Mitchell & Helson, 1990). Middle adulthood, then,

offers less reactivity to emotions and actions become less colored by emotions (G.Labouvie-Vief 1985, 1994).

To subsume all this activity under the task of generativity strains credulity. Qualities that are described, and generally agreed upon, have less to do with caring for others and more to do with an expansion of one's self.

Revisiting the Tasks of Middle Adulthood

Middle adulthood has tasks that include: adjustment to physical aging, new attitudes and roles that reflect a different time of life, and facing personal mortality. Acceptance of physical aging includes: menopause; decline in youthful appearance; and some, but not as many as previously assumed, cognitive deficits. New attitudes and roles refers to: growing up and taking charge in new ways; the ability to live in an "empty nest"; different forms of nurturing; and simplifying life with an attention to self. Facing personal mortality is the confrontation with limits, ultimately those of life itself; a growing sense of last chances; and regret for roads not taken. Women who worked, may worry that they missed out on personal relationships; women who did not work, may regret that they were not tested in the outside world.

The tasks noted above include losses as well as gains. A certain developmental mourning is necessary to let go of outdated roles, beliefs and behaviors. Middle adulthood still affords time and energy to explore new directions, internal and external. For many women, middle adulthood is a time to pause and consider a personal definition of accomplishment, whether it be work, children, relationships, integrity, authenticity, health, survival, or another value. Generativity, in the broadest sense, is far greater than being "mom"; it encompasses all creative productions, including the

creation of an authentic self. What we see is that at midlife and beyond, generativity appears in creative ways that go beyond the care of others and into business, relationships, artistic productions and self.

Alternative Explanations to Erikson's View

From clinical work and the results of an accumulation of feminist thought and research, we find that women in middle adulthood do not see their primary task as "care" nor do they describe their psychosocial task as providing guidance for the next generation. Are these women aberrations of normal development? To ignore the stories women tell about their experience is to give up the gains made in feminist thinking during recent years. Other interpretations of women's adult development are available. Several possibilities are offered for examination and discussion -

- Stage theory may not be the best explanation for women's adult development; it is certainly not the only explanation. Some writers suggest that we replace stages with a recycling, ever deepening, series of phases (Conarton & Silverman, 1988). Development then, may not be linear; but cyclical instead, with life issues being reworked.
- The masculine identity path has been described as going from autonomy/self eventually to interdependence/other. So, for men, the emphasis in middle age is the care of others and concern for guiding future generations. Women have grappled earlier in life with those particular issues, perhaps on a path from interdependence/other to autonomy/self at middle age.
- Women's lives may have more developmental strands than previously envisioned, with women moving among them, picking one up and then another. Bateson (1989)

described women's lives as continually refocused and redefined. This accounts for descriptions of life as "a balancing act" or "juggling" accompanied by anxiety and feelings of being overwhelmed. The belief that development follows a singular path has contributed to women feeling guilty and torn by multiple, equally important roles. Other authors have suggested that, at an earlier stage, identity and intimacy are intertwined in development (Douvan & Adelson, 1966). Perhaps generativity begins earlier than hypothesized and, by middle adulthood, is intertwined with authenticity, a return to the self. Women who guided others and nurtured connections for decades can use middle adulthood to replenish themselves and store up nourishment for the declines of the future. Furthermore, the original problem may lie in Erikson's idea of central struggles, cast as "this vs. that", an attitude of opposing choices, whereas women balance "this & this", an attitude of coequal responsibilities.

Conclusions

Between the years spent caring for growing children and aged parents, women wish to preserve time free from the needs of others. Middle aged women are proud of their abilities to guide others, but use phrases like, "I want to simplify my life" "I want an unencumbered life" "What about me?" and "When is it my turn?"(Edelstein, 1995). Gilligan's "ethic of care" explains problems that women experience in the middle years. Women mirror society's expectations and are comfortable caring for OTHERS. Care of self and connection to self has proved more difficult. Many women fear that stepping forward is synonymous with stepping on others. They worry about doing damage to precious relationships and being seen as SELFISH. One aspect of the middle years is reformulating the balance of these attitudes and activities.

Erikson's concept of psychosocial crises are commonly used to create a focus of therapeutic effort (Wastell, 1996). But if the accepted psychosocial task of middle adulthood is generativity, and the successful resolution is the care of future generations, and the unsuccessful resolution is self-absorption or stagnation, women are being counseled against their own experience.

An eternal female struggle remains - to 'be' and to 'be with'. Without generativity, . . the middle years and beyond become empty; with only generativity and no responsible interest in their own lives, women become entirely other-focused and grow estranged from themselves.

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